

Steve Sisney

Cleta Deatherage

An Exercise in Practical Politics

After eight years of pleading the cause of higher education in the Oklahoma State Legislature, Cleveland County Representative Cleta Deatherage decided during this fall's legislative interim to trade her practical knowledge for first-hand faculty experience as an adjunct visiting professor of political science at the University of Oklahoma.

Deatherage's semester class load was somewhat lighter than most of her colleagues, since part of her special appointment was to be available for individual and small-group student counseling on issues of public life and politics. She did not share the typical departmental and institutional committee assignments, supervise graduate students or conduct research. But she did get close enough

to gain a greater appreciation of how many of her constituents earn their living.

"I have listened to my colleagues on the House floor harangue about 'college professors who only teach six hours per week' all my legislative career," Deatherage explains. "Now, after having done it myself, I would invite any who think it is easy to prepare six hours worth of lectures and learning material each week, to do so for a semester. Just the sheer volume of paperwork for 150 students is a nightmare."

Deatherage taught an introductory United States government course for 100 students, mostly freshmen and sophomores, and a state government course with an enrollment of 50. The classes contained a smattering of political science majors while the

overwhelming majority were satisfying a social sciences requirement.

But a desire to walk in someone else's shoes was not the Norman Democrat's only motivation in going into the classroom. "Two years ago I spent a semester at Harvard as a fellow at the Institute of Politics and taught a three-hour study course on the 'New Federalism,'" Deatherage says, "and I discovered a couple of things: I like to teach, and I am hung up on college students and the collegiate scene in general. Everything I have achieved I owe to the University of Oklahoma. I had a wonderful experience here as a student, and I guess I've never completely gotten over it."

The brief stay at Harvard also reaffirmed Deatherage's growing concern about civic literacy in the United



Bill Stanhope, left, holds a hurried conference with the "governor," Dale Burkett, before debate on the tax hike.



Mary Witherow, Democratic caucus chair, speaks for the governor's proposal and draws a laugh from Kari Ferguson.

States and fueled a fear that most Americans lack the basic understanding necessary to preserve a democracy.

"The young people who populate college classrooms are our hope for the future," she insists. "If they don't have a fundamental knowledge of our democratic system of government, what chance do we have?"

On the first day of class, Professor Deatherage set out to discover just what Sooner undergraduates knew and felt about their government. She followed roll call with a non-graded basic knowledge quiz, composed of questions such as "How many houses are there in Congress? Name them." and "What is the Bill of Rights?" Alarming but not surprisingly, their range of knowledge mirrored the understanding of the public-at-large.

"As I went over that first quiz, I was reminded that on almost every trip to the grocery store, I am asked by someone, 'How are things in Washington?' the Oklahoma lawmaker says. "I have long since stopped trying to explain. I just say 'Fine' and go on to the frozen foods." This time, however, Deatherage could insist on a clearer comprehension on the part of her audience.

The range of her students' political awareness ran the gamut — from students who knew all the answers to one who identified George Nigh as her Congressman and another who identified the houses of Congress as

the House of Representatives and the Democrats.

"The inadequacy of high school civics training is startling," Deatherage concludes. "I'm pleased to say that those who take high school government in my home town of Norman and in several other high schools around the state have a good, solid background available to them. But even in Norman, a course in government isn't required — and we ought to do something about that in Oklahoma."

**"The Democrats were
barely organized at all
. . . but in the end
they competed very well—
I'm not quite sure how."**

"Most of my students at OU this fall were of voting age and will be participating soon in the act of self-government — if they aren't already," Deatherage says, "yet, they had difficulty with the very basic information about that government."

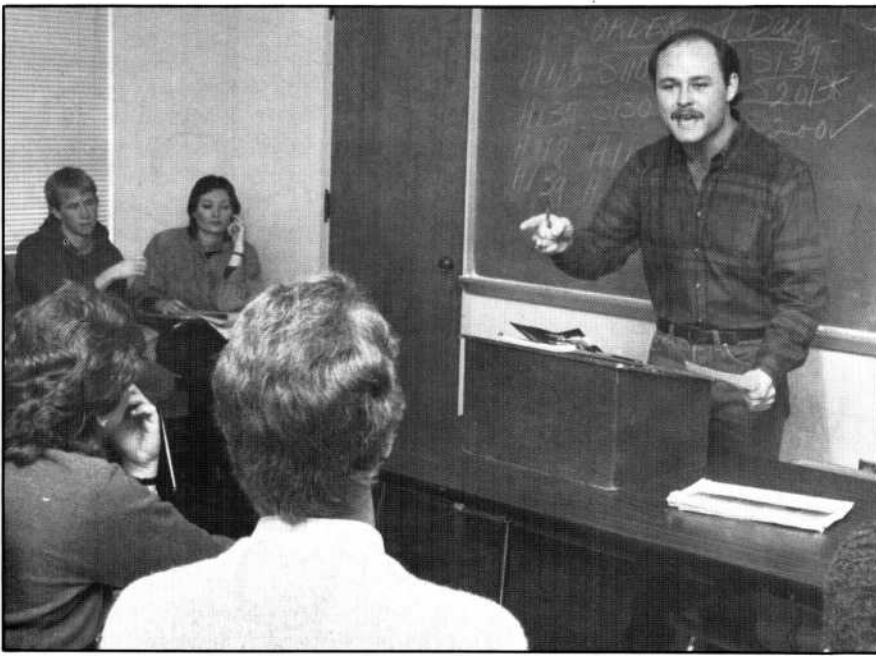
But if Deatherage discovered a shortfall in factual knowledge, she did find a surplus of strong feelings on public issues among her students. "They have opinions — some well-reasoned, others not," she says. "They are good Americans; they love their country; they believe in the American

system of government — but they are skeptical of the people who run it."

In the latter part of the semester, Deatherage decided to give the skeptics an opportunity to be those very people, at least in theory. In her U.S. government classes, she divided the class into Democrats and Republicans and had them prepare debates on four issues of their choosing. In the state government class, she set up a mock legislative session, complete with "state officials" headed by a "governor," "lobbyists," "agency heads," and the "news media."

"It was remarkable how true-to-life the mock debates and mock legislative session were," she explains. "The Democrats vs. Republicans debates reminded me of all the partisan experiences I have ever had. The Republicans had a virtual army of participants, were well-organized, well-armed with material, facts, references, etc. The Democrats were barely organized at all, had many fewer volunteers, not terribly intense — but well-meaning, and in the end they competed very well — although I'm not sure how. I recalled Will Rogers' famous line, 'I'm not a member of any organized political party . . . I'm a Democrat.'"

However, it was in the mock legislature that the students really came to life. With the bona fide state legislature in the throes of an actual budget crisis and the newspapers, radio and television full of debate on the subject, Deatherage felt that the



Steve Sisney

In the top photo, "Governor" Dale Burkett makes a strong plea with the classroom legislature for a tax increase to preserve state services, convinced that he has the facts and figures to carry the day. The bottom photo, however, mirrors the range of reactions to the debate which followed – even among his own Democratic representatives – from skepticism to downright boredom to laughter.

climate was ideal to give her students a hands-on experience.

"I am sure that the students believe that 'real-life' legislatures are better organized and better trained," Deatherage says, "but actually their 'legislature' was surprisingly close to reality. The 'elected executives' and 'agency heads' debated the existence of a budget crisis among themselves and when they were convinced that one existed, they went after a tax increase to preserve state services, such as education. They presented their

facts, outlined solutions and really felt that their cause was just and their need self-evident. They were so emotionally involved that they almost forgot that it was an exercise."

The proponents of the mock tax increase forgot one other thing that ultimately determined the outcome in the classroom legislature. "No one from the 'agencies' bothered to talk to individual 'legislators,'" Deatherage explains, "and the 'legislators' were offended. They reacted just as the legislature often reacts. They voted

the tax increase down."

The "agency heads" and the "governor" couldn't believe it. They protested to Deatherage that somehow their experiment hadn't worked; even the "legislators" themselves were not quite sure what had happened, and both sides took the issue very seriously.

"On the campus the next day, I ran into one of the 'legislators' who had voted against the tax increase," Deatherage recalls, "and she reported that the 'agency heads' were really angry with her and had carried on the debate even outside the classroom. They couldn't figure out what had gone wrong."

Deatherage tried to convince the class that their experiment had worked perfectly, that they had responded just as their counterpart legislature might have under similar circumstances.

"They had assumed that facts and figures and reason would carry the day," Deatherage says. "They ignored personalities and practical politics, and they found that even among themselves – in that one class – the human element prevailed. It was amazingly accurate."

While the students in Deatherage's classes were gaining insight into the actual workings of government, the legislator herself feels that she was gaining a better grasp of the higher education message which she has been delivering to her legislative colleagues.

"It's one thing to represent higher education from the philosophical perspective," she says, "and quite another to actually experience the pleasures and the problems of the college classroom." □

EDITOR'S NOTE: First elected to the Oklahoma State Legislature in 1977 at the age of 26, Representative Cleta Deatherage, D-Norman, '73 BA, '75 JD, served two terms as chair of the powerful House Appropriations and Budget Committee – the only woman to hold that post – and was a major force in providing record-setting funding for higher education. She is presently chair of the House Committee on Economic Development and recently was honored as one of the nation's five outstanding women in government by the U.S. Jaycee Women.